

Investigating Factors Influencing Oman School-Based Educational Reform

Proposal Submitted Seeking TRC Fund Grant

Introduction

This proposal aims to present a national strategic research project attempting to investigate the factors that influence the implementation of an educational reform in the Omani context, utilizing research to systematically structure and sustain school-based improvement. The project is situated within a running regional research and development educational project in the Arab region called TAMAM. TAMAM is an Acronym for "التطوير المستند الى المدرسة" or School based reform. TAMAM Project is an attempt at educational reform in the Arab region that combines research to development in triggering, supporting, and understanding school-based initiatives for sustainable improvement and improvement of student learning. It investigates the causes of the shortcomings of educational reform in the Arab schools that hinder the achievement of its set goals at the level of the institution, practitioners and students' learning, despite the allocated resources and abundance of professional development. The project also developed strategies and actions that should be followed by educators in schools, universities and policy making, to ensure the effectiveness of school-based sustainable improvement. TAMAM's main aim is building a theory of practice for successful school reform that is based on evidence and grounded in the cultural realities of our Arab context. The project was piloted on a limited scale in Omani public schools since 2012. This experience has shown promising prospects in informing the development of a national school-based improvement design that is customized to capture the unique characteristics of the Omani context, building on its assets and addressing the existing needs of its educational practitioners at all levels. In fact, the Omani experience with the TAMAM Project showed that there is a dire necessity to understand the unique needs of the Omani educational context, and to generate reform strategies that respond to its school improvement needs. For this reason, the proposed national strategic project will build on this experience and expand into a transformational change movement in Oman, aiming to develop the capacity of school teachers to lead change initiatives in their schools.

Literature Review

The series of reforms and investments in developing education in the Arab region have not achieved the desired economic, technological and social development (World Bank, 2008; Arab knowledge Report 2014). Karami-Akkary (2014) and Akkary and Rizk (2014) argue that these reforms did not cause major improvements at the level of schools, including classroom teaching and learning and school culture. This is because these reforms are typically advanced by ministries and policy-makers as large-scale initiatives characterized by "one-size-fits-all" approach (World Bank, 2008; El Amine, 2005). They are predominantly disconnected from the priorities of school contexts and the professional needs of practitioners (Abi-Mershed, 2010; Mazawi, 2010). Thus, they neglect the capacity building of practitioners who implement these changes. Also, there is an absence of a theoretical understanding of educational reform in the Arab region (El Amine, 2005). As a result, such reforms heavily rely on ideas that emerged in the West or on foreign consultants (Karami-Akkary, 2014; Bashshur, 2010), neglecting the role of local universities, research centers and professors of education. Lastly, these reforms are introduced as disconnected innovations rarely connected to problems in teachers' practices (Karami-Akkary et al., 2010). Thus, these top-down reforms do not deliver their desired goals, impede

collaboration among school practitioners, communication and collective agency for change and improvement, and disengage those who are most fit to lead those changes (Fullan, 2016; Harris, 2002).

Awareness of cultural and contextual priorities has been recommended by researchers investigating effective educational change. In fact, there are several values, professional norms and assumptions that underlie these reforms (Hallinger, 2010); hence, this requires a thorough understanding of the local culture and contexts for change to be relevant, useful and meaningful (Karami-Akkary, 2014; Wilson and Daviss, 1994). To counter the disconnect between the top-down reforms and the needs of practitioners, the adoption of a reform approach that promotes top-down support for bottom-up and school based improvement is recommended (Fullan, 2016; Karami-Akkary, 2014). As such, successful and effective reform will require the collaboration of various stakeholders from universities, school and policy-making sector. Lastly, effective and sustainable change in schools essentially requires the capacity building of teachers and **administrators** so they lead the process (Harris, 2001; Hargreaves, 2007; Fullan, 2016). Particularly, Lambert (2003) recommends building their leadership capacity, reflection and problem solving skills. This can be achieved when professional development is experiential, ongoing and directly linked to needs and problems of practice (Glickman et al., 2010). Lastly, the improvement of practices can be achieved through action research, which promotes the practitioners' and researchers' inquiry into issues of practice, the production of evidence to guide decision during improvement and the production of knowledge that is based on local practices and contexts (Gall et al., 2005; Mitchel et al., 2008; Karami-Akkary, 2014). These techniques have shown promising impact on the learning, skills and attitudes of those involved in change, and on the organizational development (Karami-Akkary et al., 2016).

Rationale

1. School reforms in the Arab world and Oman specifically have been dominated by a top-down centralized model, relying extensively on experts from outside the local context.
2. There is a tendency to adopt one-size-fits-all models of reform or a foreign school reform in a largely incompatible context.
3. School reforms widely infuse change nationally in order to resolve common educational issues quickly.
4. Changes in centralized educational leadership interrupts school reforms and deviates them from their intended outcomes, if not changing the reform before completion.
5. Timid representation of school-based agents in strategic decisions when planning significant educational reforms makes them less effective than they are intended.
6. Many school reforms tend to focus primarily on students' achievements and pay marginalized attention to learning skills and attitudes, which weakens their impact on authentic learning and neglects the multi-layered relationships between knowledge, skills, and attitudes.
7. Although the Ministry of Education has adopted school performance development program, unfortunately it has not achieved its desired objectives since it has not focused much on teachers as educational developers.

Project Long-Term Goals

The project's long-term goals, it is hoped, are:

1. Empowering educational practitioners and equipping them with essential skills that will boost their capacity to improve student's learning in the Omani schools.
2. Understanding the theoretical underpinnings of school based reform processes and challenges, leading to an evidence-based understanding of what needs to be done to solve the issue of failed reform.

3. Building a growing network of educational practitioners with the leadership capacity for learning and change agency at schools, SQU, and at the level of policy makers.
4. Accumulating grounded school-based and evidence-based experiences for improvement that are used to develop professional development materials for building leadership capacity for change in the Omani context.
5. Designing strategies that build communication channels between three key players in the reform process: practitioners, researchers, and policy makers.
6. Positioning the college of education at SQU as a house of expertise in leading educational development in national schools.
7. Supporting the Ministry of Education efforts in formulating appropriate strategies to implement school-based development.

Project Short-Term Goals

1. Empowering Omani teachers to lead school-based change.
2. Positioning teachers at the center of change using a bottom-up approach (schools to Ministry) in educational reform.
3. Equipping the participating teachers, the skills, knowledge, and positive attitudes towards sustainable school-based reform.
4. Executing the school-reform flexibly and with the necessary experiential training, which makes it worthwhile as it provides added-value to teachers, in order to instill sustainable school reform.
5. Developing a number of culturally grounded professional pillars and a school-based reform model which is regarded as a roadmap for teachers in order to achieve sustainable school reform.
6. Understanding the supporting and impeding factors influencing Omani school reform.
7. Studying to what extent this educational reform project could succeed compared to other countries in the region implementing it.
8. Putting into effect the partnership between SQU and Ministry of Education which gives the project additional support and acceptability with teachers.
9. Publishing at least 4 studies about educational reform in Omani schools.
10. Participating and sharing the experience in a number of specialized conferences.
11. Launching an educational reform handbook for Omani schools as a future guide for bottom-up school reform.

Project Outcomes

The outcome, it is hoped, will be a theoretical understanding of school based reform processes and challenges leading to an evidence-based understanding of what needs to be done to solve the issue of failed reform. In addition, the project aims to build a growing network of educational practitioners with the leadership capacity for learning and agency for change at the school, university, and policy makers/ ministry levels. The outcome is also an accumulation of school-based experiences for improvement, supported by evidence, that are used to develop professional development materials for building leadership capacity for change. We also aim to develop strategies that build communication channels and partnerships between the three key players in the reform process: practitioners, researchers, and policy makers are designed. Ultimately, we aim to empower practitioners and equip them with essential skills that will develop their capacity to improve student's learning in the Omani schools.

Methodology and approach

The methodology followed to answer the proposed questions is on-going research, particularly using qualitative action research and grounded theory. These techniques have been recommended by researchers, to generate knowledge that is responsive to and grounded in the socio-cultural context of research activities (Charmaz, 2014; Karami-Akkary et al., 2012; Karami-Akkary et al., 2016). The principal investigators will design an intervention that is guided by the TAMAM project approach and lessons learned (Karami-Akkary et al., 2012; Karami-Akkary et al., 2013; Karami-Akkary et al., 2016). In the initiation stage of the project, the design of the project's intervention and capacity building model will be guided by the TAMAM school based improvement journey, yet they will be customized to fit the Omani context throughout the implementation process as per the grounded theory methodology approach (Charmaz, 2014). University researchers and school practitioners will engage in an iterative process of research and development guided by the improvement journey that is rooted in inquiry, professional dialogue, reflection and collaboration. Throughout the journey, initiatives for improvement are designed, planned, implemented, monitored, and then evaluated by the school based teams. Concurrently, a process of capacity building, based on emerging needs, is provided by trained coaches. This process is maintained through a continuous process of mentoring, challenge and support. Close connection is also maintained with policy makers (at schools and ministry levels), seeking their support and encouraging them to incorporate these initiatives in their strategic planning for school improvement. With that, and in line with the TAMAM approach, the project will attempt to influence their leadership approaches to strategic planning for improvement at the school and ministry levels.

Accordingly, and building on the successful experience of the Omani schools participating in TAMAM, university professors are expected to work with practitioners at the school level to build their leadership capacity for learning, to initiate the efforts for renewal, or to pro-actively reshape existing top-down initiatives for reform into ones grounded in the practitioners' felt needs. They will challenge and support these practitioners in a way that is experientially relevant to their context (job embedded) and responsive to their needs and priorities. University professors, acting coaches and researchers, will collect and analyze data to monitor and reflect on progress as well as answer the research questions that aim to develop a grounded understanding of the best processes to be followed for school based improvement and improvement of student learning. Throughout their work/intervention, the proposed project principal investigators will also connect educators at all levels [teachers, researchers, policy makers] throughout the stages of the reform process. They will actively engage them in concurrent development experiences and research; thus, sharing both the responsibility to learn, to uncover what path(s) to improvement work best in our schools and educational organizations, as well as to design plans of improvement and implement the designed interventions.

Research Questions

The proposed project aims at initiating a transformational change movement by investigating: 1) the causes for the persistent shortcomings of educational reform in achieving its set goals at the level of the institution, practitioners and students' learning despite the resources allocated and the abundance of professional development; and 2) the strategies and actions needed to be followed by educators in schools, universities, and policy makers in ministries of education to solve the above problem, and to ensure the effectiveness of school reform and improvement initiatives in the Sultanate of Oman. It specifically aims at investigating the following research questions:

1. What are the supporting and impeding factors that influence educational reform in Omani schools?

2. What are the development competencies and skills possessed by Omani schools' teachers before conducting the school-based reform program?
3. What is the impact of the school-based reform model on equipping the teachers of the Omani schools the competencies necessary for educational reform?
4. What are the perceptions of the teachers of the Omani schools towards adopting the designed model for educational reform?
5. Do the teachers' perceptions differ towards the adoption of the designed model for educational reform according to teachers' gender?

Sample

Six public Omani schools (3 for males schools and 3 for females schools) will be selected to participate in the project's pilot phase. The schools will be selected from Muscat, Dakhilah, and South Batinah educational regions based on particular criteria, such as their cooperation, previous experience with school-based projects, and commitment of administration to the project. A school-based project team will be formed in each school, in order to implement the educational project that the school finds most appropriate for their own current needs. The team would comprise of around 5 to 6 members, including teachers and administrators.

Instruments

1. Member profile for every single project team member at each school.
2. Educational development competency questionnaire (Diagnostic survey) for every single project team member at each school to be administered before and after implementation.
3. Focus groups with each team to be administered before and after implementation.
4. Teachers perceptions scale towards the adopted educational reform model.
5. Questionnaires and tests examining the impact of the school-based educational project on the targeted sample.

Tools to be used by teachers to execute the project

In order to establish an effective execution of the project in Omani schools, team members will be trained on a number of school-based improvement competencies using:

1. Sustainable school-based improvement journey model
2. Action research cycle model

The teams' members will also be trained to use the following tools which will be refined for the Omani context:

1. Project initial plan
2. Evaluation plan
3. Implementation report
4. Project final report

Proposed project budget

Details are delineated in the TRC application website.

Researchers

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3. Dr. Khalaf AlAbri (SQU)
4. Mr. Khalid AlBassami (Ministry of Education)

5. Dr. Rima Karami (Overseas consultant – AUB)

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